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How Can You Tell If Your Salespeople Have Enough Bandwidth?

UNSATISFIED CUSTOMERS, UNSUCCESSFUL PRODUCT LAUNCHES, DECREASING SUPPORT FOR COMPLEX PRODUCTS AND MARKETS, MISSED QUOTAS, INCREASING TURNOVER IN THE SALES FORCE...

These issues can all be symptoms of an overextended sales force. Sales leaders often debate whether their salespeople have enough capacity or “bandwidth” (adequate knowledge, the right skills, enough time) to successfully perform their roles. They wonder whether each sales rep’s product portfolio or “bag” is too big or whether the rep covers too many customers or performs too many activities. Pushed too far, salespeople cannot effectively perform their jobs, and they may make trade-offs that compromise a company’s performance. How can you tell whether your salespeople have enough bandwidth?

Take, for example, a business development manager (BDM) for an accounting, tax and consulting firm. If asked to represent and sell the firm’s entire service offering, he must be conversant with more than 30 complex services. He must be able to credibly interact with the senior leaders of their prospects’ management teams across functions as varied as accounting, finance, IT, operations and human resources. And, he must be familiar with the dynamics and needs of several target industries. Can a BDM be successful in this role?

Evaluating the Sales Environment
Determining whether a sales person has enough bandwidth does not turn on the answer to one or two questions. Rather, it requires a careful assessment of the overall selling environment. As the characteristics of the variables in Table 1 suggest, a sales person needs more bandwidth as the complexity and diversity of the customer set, product/service mix, and sales process increases. A selling environment that requires less bandwidth lends itself to a more general sales role (territory manager) whereas a situation that requires broader bandwidth often necessitates a team of specialists to handle the different complex elements of the selling environment (strategic account manager, industry specialist, product specialist).

The proposed role for the BDM described earlier is problematic and unrealistic as it expects a sales person to sell a broad portfolio of complex services to a diverse set of stakeholders across many industries. To be successful, the BDM must have strong account development and management skills as well as technical expertise in multiple subject areas and industries—a combination of skills difficult for one person to master.

If put in this position, the BDM is likely to focus on the services and industries with which he is most familiar and/or comfortable. The services and industries falling outside his comfort zone are less likely to receive adequate attention, leaving the balance of his portfolio wanting in sales time and results.

A “Generalist” May Be More Efficient But Not More Effective

To define an appropriate scope for the BDM in this example (or a sales role in general), sales leaders should consider different ways to split the

Table 1: Bandwidth Requirements

Key Characteristics	Bandwidth Demand		Type of Specialization
	Lower	Higher	
Customer			
Industry mix	Homogenous	Heterogeneous	
Typical customer size	Small	Large	
Buying Process	Simple	Complex	
Number and type of stakeholders involved in the buying process	Fewer and similar	Many and diverse	Customer/ Market
Length of buying process	Short	Long	
Geographic scope	Local	Global	
Product/ Service Offering			
Nature of products/ service	Simple	Technical and complex	Product/ Service
Nature of Products/ service portfolio	Narrow and similar	Broad and diverse	
Sales Process			
Nature of sales process	Short, simple, transactional	Long, complex and consultative	
Sales activities performed	Few, simple	Many, complex	Sales Activity

selling responsibilities. The most common ways are to do so by customer type, by product/service or by sales activity (see Table 1). Sales leaders can design roles that satisfy the bandwidth requirements of their selling situations and define manageable roles for their sales people by considering various types and combinations of specialization.

For example, companies with broad portfolios of complex products and/or services often use product/service line specialists to support the selling efforts of their “generalist” account managers. Companies that have less complex products and services but serve a diverse range of complex industries often employ market specialists who understand the nuances of each industry. Similarly, companies that have complex sales processes often focus personnel on different phases of the process (lead generation and qualification, proposal development, closing).

When companies like the accounting, tax and consulting firm face complexities across several of these dimensions, we often suggest the use of multiple specialists to manage the bandwidth challenge. For example, to serve its largest accounts, the firm can deploy strategic account managers (SAMs)

to lead its selling efforts and support them with technical experts in each discipline (accounting, tax) and industry (manufacturing, healthcare, financial services). Given these roles, the SAMs can focus on developing account relationships and pulling in the right experts at the right time to help discover account needs, present firm credentials, develop and present proposals and close opportunities.

The Key to the Bandwidth Challenge

Understanding the bandwidth requirements of the selling situation is a critical element of the sales force design process. The nature of the customer set, the products/services and the sales process combine to define the bandwidth that is necessary to serve the market. Determining whether and what type of specialization is needed to satisfy this bandwidth requirement is the key to defining roles that salespeople can perform successfully.

SUMMARY

If your sales team is not performing to expectations or your go-to-market system is not delivering the desired results, we invite you to schedule a complimentary, half-day meeting with us in our Chicago office. To do so, please contact Jim Fogarty at 312.558.4805 or jfogarty@franklynn.com.



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